



N. Callan
Papers for the Times.



In the Times of St. Patrick.

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In the Times of St. Patrick.

HE fifth century of our era was an epoch-making time. In the British Isles and various European countries an old order passed away, and a new order came in.

The Roman Empire

after an existence of a thousand years, during much of which it had ruled and practically run the known world, was well past its zenith, and rapidly on the decline. From being self-restrained and masculine, living in its early centuries an exigent and simple life, the nation, growing rich, became effeminate and licentious almost beyond description. Deformed and demoralised, it could no longer retain its hold on the robust and turbulent tribes it had subjected in the days of its early might. These

restless and hungry barbarians were quick to detect the weakening of the erstwhile strong arm. Whole provinces of the empire, ill protected and badly ruled, appeared to offer themselves an easy prey ; and so in rapid succession the Goths, Vandals, and Huns, under desperadoes like Alaric, Genseric, and Attila swooped down from the North, ravaged the central European provinces, sacked Rome twice, and spared it a third sacking only on payment of a heavy ransom, and finally tore five or six provinces away from the Roman Empire, which were speedily formed into new kingdoms in Italy, Germany, Burgundy, and Spain.

In distant Britain there was a marked relaxing of the grip of steel, and the incursions of Saxons, Picts, and Scots, together with Continental troubles, became so many and determined, as to compel the withdrawal of the Roman garrisons from the country, and its formal severance from the Empire. During the four hundred and fifty years of the Roman oc-

cupation, the face of the country had become greatly changed. Before, there were neither bridges nor roads, nor gardens nor fields, nor stone-built towers nor paved streets, nor lighthouses nor mason work piers. The better part of the country was forest or marsh. There were bears and wolves and wild boars in the woods, bustards on the plains, and beavers in the rivers and streams. The Romans, during their occupation, developed agriculture, made splendid roads, built large towns, with their palaces, temples, theatres, baths, and municipal institutions, and constructed hundreds of miles of enormous walls as a protection against predacious neighbours. Even in Scotland, between the Firths of Clyde and Forth, was the wall of Antoninus, and not far from the southern end of it was

the birthplace of Patrick.

He calls is Bonavem Taberniae himself, but it is called Nemthur by his biographer, Fiacc.

perhaps Glasgow

It was a town in Strath Clyde, and almost certainly identical with the modern Dumbarton. That it was a Roman town and of some importance, we gather from the fact that it had a municipal council, Patrick's father, Calpurnius, having been a town councillor. Born before clerical celibacy had become the fashion, Patrick came of a clerical stock, his father, although a town councillor, having been a deacon, and his grandfather a presbyter, whilst his mother is alleged to have been sister to a bishop. How or when Christianity had reached that part of the world is not known; but from the prevailing type of it found there, high authorities hold that it was introduced by Christian soldiers from Gaul in the Roman army of occupation. On his father's farm of sixteen acres it is believed that Patrick lived till he was sixteen. He had got a religious training both from his parents and Christian pastors, but tells us frankly that he "knew not the true God;" and also acknowledges that,

on one occasion, he fell into a heinous sin. The nature of this he does not disclose, but he bitterly repented of it, and confessed it before his ordination, although it was ungenerously cast up to him by enemies, after thirty years, when he was a Bishop in Ireland. It was in this critical period of his life, that his mental and moral maturing were accelerated by his being

carried a captive to Ireland.

It happened in this wise. Niall of the Nine Hostages, Irish King of Kings, warrior and freebooter, was in the end of the fourth century the scourge of the British coasts; and in one of his forays made a descent on Strath Clyde. One day about the year 390 Nemthur and its suburbs were startled by a loud alarm from the garrison on Dumbarton Rock that a hostile fleet was in the Clyde. It was too true. There the vessels were, some hundreds of them, Irish

coracles, each breasted like a giant bird, and filled with the wild warriors of Dalaradia, who had given a taste of their quality at various places along the coasts of Britain. Such resistance to the invader as was possible was made, but to no purpose. The Roman garrison was put to the sword, the town was sacked, and as Patrick tells us "many thousand men" were carried away captive to Ireland, among them Patrick himself.

It is said by some biographers that his sister, Lupait, was also in the company, but the statement lacks authority; and it is quite clear that other members of his father's family escaped, as ten years later we find him living "in the Britains" with them again. In Ireland Patrick found a master in Milcho Huanan, a Dalaradian Prince, who owned an estate and lived in a palace near Broughshane. It was a picturesque and pleasant valley; but Patrick, the slave of a savage, and drudging daily under the lash, was in no mood to take much note of

landscapes and skies. His special occupation was tending cattle, but from an incident in connection with his escape, we infer that he here became familiar also with the feeding and care of dogs. The squalid details of his slave life in the valley of the Braid are not recorded: one all-important event, however, he emphasises in telling the story of his life. It was while floundering in the depths of degradation and despair that he touched the firm ground of the Christian hope. He was, to use his own words, "converted with all his heart to God." And his was conversion, exactly as understood by evangelical Christians now—a radical change divinely wrought. In humble, simple fashion he tells us that it found him ignorant of the true God, and brought him to saving knowledge; found him away from God, and brought him near; found him unconscious of his state, and made him to "remember his sins;" found him helpless, "like a stone lying in deep mud," and lifted him and set him upon a wall. The

thoroughness of the change is obvious from its concomitants and results. Henceforth "the Spirit was fervent within him," he prayed as many as a hundred times in a day, and "the love of God and fear increased more and more."

Patrick's Escape from Ireland

was the next important event in his life. Like many early Christians, he was a great believer in dreams, and his heart leaped with joy when, after six years' bondage, a voice said to him one night in his sleep, "thou fastest well; thou shalt soon go to thy country, . . . behold thy ship is ready." Looking on this as a message from God, he immediately ran away, travelled two hundred miles "in the strength of the Lord," and ultimately reached an unknown seaport, by some identified with Wicklow, and by others with Killala. Ireland in these days was famed for an unrivalled breed of hunting dogs, known still, through a few surviving specimens,

as the Irish wolf dog, and the noblest animals probably of the canine species. These dogs were in high repute in the sporting world, and in great demand in various parts of the Continent of Europe. In the port, when Patrick reached it, was a vessel having a consignment of these valuable animals on board, and about to sail for a continental market. Having, with great difficulty, obtained permission to work his passage out, he was taken on board, and after a voyage of three days, the traders landed, as is believed, on the coast of Brittany, and taking Patrick with them, travelled twenty-eight days in the direction of the North of Italy. The journey, however, was through a desert, in which their provisions ran out, and dogs and traders were saved from starvation only by his skilful and prayerful activity. After "a few years" of unrecorded adventure, we next hear of him in the Britains with his parents, who express the fervent hope they will never be parted from him again. But the hunger for souls was

in his heart, and fed by two more dream-visions, the missionary spirit overbore all opposition, and between the years 400 and 405

Patrick's Mission to Ireland

was begun with a zeal and earnestness worthy of its phenomenal success. When or where, or by whom he was ordained is wholly unknown. It was affirmed indeed by Tirechan several centuries after Patrick's death that he was ordained a Bishop by Pope Celestine, and sent to take the place of Palladius, the first Irish Bishop, in the year 432. This assertion, however, is unsupported and unsupportable by any proof, and is, moreover, in conflict with known facts. Patrick's Confession, Celestine's Life, Prosper's Chronicle, and St. Sechuall's Hymn are four contemporary documents in which it must have been recorded if true, yet it is not mentioned in one of them. Then, if he had been an emissary of Rome, he would have organised the Irish

Church along Roman lines ; but it is notorious that in the matters of ordination, baptism, the eucharist, confession, Easter observance, and others, the Irish practice differed from the Roman ; and between the clergy of the two churches neither mutual eligibility nor intercommunion prevailed. In his confession he glories in vindicating his "laborious Episcopate " solely on the ground of a Divine call to it, and the special blessing on it in undeniable spiritual results.

The field of labour

on which Patrick at once entered was peculiar, and had much to do with the organisation of the Church he set up. The inhabitants were of three races—Belgae, Northmen, and Scoti, but of only two racial types : the first, a subject race were dark and small, and the second and third—the typical Celts—were tall and fair, included the nobles, and were dominant in the

country. The Northmen spoke Cornish, which in course of time died out, the Irish, spoken by the Scoti, becoming the national language. The Celts were inveterate clan men, and the whole population was broken up into septs, each with its own territory and its own chief. The chiefs were organised in a graded aristarchy, including a High King, six over-kings, a large number of tributary kings, and under these in many instances subject chiefs. Each chief was elected by the clan, and had an estate and castle surrounded by the estates of the nobles; the remainder of the territory being enjoyed in common by the tribesmen. This grouping of the population suggested, and even necessitated, the corresponding grouping of the religious establishments to be set up, for which Ireland was remarkable.

The religion of the Pagan Celts, which is known as Druidism, is not very well understood. It was what is called an Esoteric religion—i.e., in addition to public ordinances

and belief, it had secret beliefs, and secret rites, known only to the Druadh or priests, and orally handed down from one generation of these to another, so that they never became matter of public knowledge. What has been discovered is, that it was a mongrel system or incongruous mixture of nature-worship, idolatry, and fetichism. Patrick styles it the worship of "idols and unclean things," and denounces sun-worship as part of it. Idolatry was practised at the great Diet of worship periodically held on "the Plain of Adoration" in Co. Cavan, where a huge gold-plated idol and twelve smaller brass-plated ones were sacrificed to, under the direction of Druids. An example of fetichism was the worship of sidhe, or fairies, as supposed to be resident in pillar-stones, trees, and wells. The Druids believed in a day of judgment and a future life, and as a concomitant of this in a carnal elysium in the Brugh of the Boyne, the highest joys of which were "roast pig, three trees always bearing fruit, and a vessel full of

excellent ale." The Druids were probably most of all in evidence as magicians, and *Druidecht* is said to be the Irish for magic.

Patrick's Gospel,

of which he was an indefatigable and earnest preacher, was, down almost to the most minute detail, the Gospel of Evangelical Protestants. Outstanding doctrines in it are God as a Trinity in unity, and as the only object of worship; Christ as the Son of God, and God, and Redeemer; the Holy Ghost as the quickener, renewer, and sanctifier of the soul; salvation by grace through faith; man's helplessness in sin and completeness in Christ; and entrance into bliss or misery immediately after death; and the exclusive authority of the Scriptures as the rule of faith. There is no trace in his writings of saint worship, or the worship of the Virgin, or prayers for the dead, or purgatory, or salvation by works. Judging of

his preaching by his writings, it was not **only** Scriptural, but largely in the very words of Scripture. His latest biographer says: "He was a man of one book; but with that book, the Christian Scriptures, he was extraordinarily familiar. His writings are crowded with Scriptural sentences and phrases, most of them probably quoted from memory." Of

Patrick's missionary labours

we have few reliable details. What seems reasonably certain is that he landed on the coast of Wicklow, sailed northward from there, calling at the Skerries, and the mouth of the Boyne, and finished his voyage on the shores of Strangford Lough. Here he made his first convert in the person of the chief Dichu, and built his first church at Saul. He then visited his old master, Milcho, and made converts of one of his sons and two of his daughters, the son afterwards becoming a Bishop. Returning

to Saul, he evangelised the east side of Down, his work resulting in the erection of nearly a dozen churches at or near the coast. His next and greatest missionary effort was made at Tara, the seat of the High King, and centre of Irish national life. He failed to win over to Christianity the King or his son, but his efforts were rewarded with the conversion of two court bards, who afterwards became distinguished Bishops. The tradition is that he now visited Meath—at this time a province—where he made a convert of a brother of the King; and went thence to Connaught, where he worked for seven years, and made converts of 12,000 people. In Munster he did little or nothing apparently, but he is known to have visited the Royal residence on Greenan Hill, near Derry, and believed to have founded the great church and monastery of Armagh. Of the circumstances of his death nothing is known, but it occurred about the year 465, at the age of 82, and he was buried

probably either at Downpatrick or Saul. Statements by biographers as to the scale on which he made converts are obviously exaggerated. More than a third of the country he never reached, and even where he was most successful, whole tribes refused his teaching altogether. Yet his success was almost unprecedentedly great, and when he had been working from twenty to twenty-five years the number of his converts was so considerable as to attract the notice of all Europe, including the Pope of Rome. The Pope had had no connection with the work for so far, but thought it sufficiently important to be taken under the care of the Roman See. Accordingly, Prosper in his Chronicle, under the year 431, says he "sent Palladius to the Scots, believing in Christ as their first Bishop." A chronological tract in the Speckled Book, which Dr. Petrie regards as the most authoritative Irish Manuscript on Church History, says of the occurrence, "Palladius was sent by Pope Celestine

with a Gospel with him to Patrick to preach to the Irish." This shows that Patrick was in the field before Palladius came, and that the mission of the latter failed just because its object was to subordinate Patrick to himself, and the Irish Church would not have it. The theory that Patrick came after Palladius in 432 is chronologically impossible. It is the theory that he did not begin his work till he was sixty years of age, that he lived till 492, when he was one hundred and twenty years old, and so that he survived not only his biographer, Kilian, but Benignus and Jarlath, his two immediate successors, things not only collectively but individually incredible. An interesting but rather obscure subject is

the Constitution of Patrick's Church.

We are familiar with the statement in Nennius that Patrick founded 365 churches, with a bishop and six or seven priests in each.

The statement, with variations, is made by several other writers, and is generally accepted as approximately correct. But only approximately. In the Church founded by Patrick an evolution took place in three stages, and the statement of Nennius, true of the third stage, is not quite true of the second, and in one item altogether untrue of the first. The "Catalogue," an authoritative eighth century document, which defines these stages, tells us that in the first (which continued from 432 to 544) the clerics "were all bishops, famous and holy. 350 in number, founders of churches," that in the second "were few bishops, in number 300. and many presbyters;" and that in the third "were holy presbyters and a few bishops, 100 in number." It is in the first stage that we see the Church of St. Patrick, in the form in which he set it up. Every church had then its own bishop. Where seven bishops lived together in a college or monastery—and there were many such cases—there were often seven churches

i.e. the Presbyterian system

for them to man, as in Glendalough and Clonmacnois; and presbyters are not mentioned at all in it, evidently because the distinction between bishops and presbyters was not made. The second period in which the presbyters appeared was that of the second evangelisation of Ireland by monks trained in Scotland and Wales. They filled the country with monasteries of a different type from those set up by Patrick, each containing a large number of presbyter monks, and ruled by a presbyter abbot. In the third period the number of bishops was further diminished, and the number of presbyters increased, until at last the modern relations between them were established, and Christianity, after the Roman type, held the field.

Patrick has lived in history and in the popular regard for 1,500 years. And his memorial, like that of so many of his countrymen, is his missionary work. He did not, like some missionaries translate the Bible into the langu-

age of the country he evangelised, nor like others lay the foundations of a national literature. He was not scholar enough for such work. But he was a gifted and devoted man, and he gave himself—his whole strength and life—to Ireland. Through his work it became the Island of Saints and Doctors when both were scarce. He lives in the hearts of all true Irishmen as their greatest benefactor, and there is a Patrician element, intrinsic and inexpugnable in Irish national history.

J. E. H.



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